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THE ROUND TABLE

THE VITAL BIOGRAPHY

It is impossible to remember all the incidental facts of an author's life unless possessed of a phenomenal memory; again, the burden of these facts is neither vital nor necessary. The cataloging of the collected writings of an author is an example. Longfellow's complete works number some thirty books, and many of them are inferior and best forgotten. Not that it is desirable to simplify the acquiring of literary knowledge to such an extent that pupils lose respect for it. There is already too much tendency to make of our assimilation of education a sugar-coated pill. But neither should we strain at a camel and swallow a gnat, nor lose sight of the forest because the trees are in the way. The success of a class in literature depends upon keeping before the mind of the pupil the beauties, emotions, and representative merits of the pieces studied; and to that end care should be taken not to smother the life and interests of the class under a wet blanket of biographical detail.

A method which I find very successful when it becomes necessary to consider an author's life is to make the following assignment: "Everybody come tomorrow prepared to tell the class an interesting fact in regard to the life, say, of Whittier." The assignment is made stringent by grading each pupil on the worthiness of his contribution. Discussion is encouraged, and an incentive added as to who can contribute the most interesting and revealing bit. The plan has a gossipy intorest, and the pupils find real enjoyment in it; they become enthusiastic. Data such as dates, parentage, changes of residence, trivial incidents of travel, and a category of writings with data of composition are not considered "interesting facts," and hence are excluded as contributions. The class roll is called, and, woman's club fashion, in answer to his name the pupil gives his information.

In many cases the above serves the double purpose of making the pupil review the life of an author entire in order to glean an interesting point, and of leading him to discriminate the outstanding facts from the irrelevant details.

There are scarcely a half-dozen facts, I dare say, that we as teachers can remember in the lives of the authors after we have had the respite of a summer in which to forget them. And what is the nature of the

points that remain with us after a summer? Are they the place and date of the birth of Burns, the removes of his family? When, and where, and under what conditions Pope wrote his first poem? What schools Wordsworth attended in his early youth? And if we could remember these details, what important bearing could they have on a broad appreciation of the author? None whatever. But we do remember that Burns lived on and toiled a few mean acres of stony, unproductive Scottish soil until his health was pitifully undermined, and he had acquired in his supple young back a life-long aching stoop. We do remember the incident of Wordsworth in a boat out in the middle of a pond, and of his suddenly scurrying shoreward because the mystery and terror of nature had overcome him; and this fact when presented to a class at once interests the pupil and illustrates to him and fixes in his mind forever the essential characteristic of Wordsworth, namely, his conception of nature. No amount of drudging over detailed chronological events brings this out; nothing seems to emphasize it so well as to mention the incident separately, discuss it, and ultimately pin the Wordsworthian characteristic to it.

Usually most of the really important facts are brought out in making the round of a class of thirty pupils, but if not, the delinquent facts can be tactfully interwoven by the teacher in the process of the discussion.

Each pupil is provided with a scratch notebook, and, during the recitation, he writes down the various contributions as they are given and passed upon. When the roll call is completed and the discussion is under way, I find it very helpful to step to the board and shape the stray thoughts into something of an outline, being careful to let the pupils do the suggesting. I usually have at hand an outline previously prepared, but I find that in most cases with a little manipulation the contributions of the class practically cover it. The outline is copied into the notebooks as it is formed.

In a consideration of Whittier, something like the following outline was obtained. It does not contain all the outstanding features of Whittier's life; a great deal more might be added of "interesting facts," but it is sufficient and all that will be remembered or applied.

I. Individual traits

A. The Quaker Poet

B. Twenty years an outcast in society because of his agitation of abolition

II. Chief subjects

A. Race question—not merely slavery; to him all men were brothers, and oppression of one degraded the whole race

B. International peace

III. Estimate

- A. Master of political oratory in verse; recognized as a commanding voice
 - 1. During period of thirty years preceding and ending with Civil War, no writer was so potent in voicing humanitarian spirit
 - 2. His anti-slavery poetry best of kind produced during period. Breathed his love of freedom
- B. Largely a neighborhood poet
 - 1. Began as a neighborhood poet, but later his stand on slavery made him a national poet
 - 2. He had an intimate knowledge of the men of his section, and a shrewd political eye for the current of public opinion

IV. Style and treatment

- A. Brought to bear in his poems the teachings of Old and New Testaments freely interpreted by the Quakers
- B. Poetry deficient in sensuous charm
 - 1. Its passion a moral passion only
- C. Like Burns, he never lost a sort of rusticity which was a part of his charm

By outlining as above a three-fold purpose is served: an orderly arrangement of facts under leading points embodying characteristics of the author, and the proper relationship of ideas; a survey of essential features which facilitates rapid review; and finally, but most valuable, an expression of the pupil's own ideas of what are the interesting and vital facts of an author's life.

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IMAGINATION IN AMERICANIZATION

It is too often assumed that only children like fairy tales. Adults like them just the same, if they do not think while they read or listen to them that such tales are childish.

In mental content the average adult illiterate is very limited. He has got nothing from books and usually he has lived and talked only with other illiterates. He has an imagination, but it, as a rule, has had very little exercise. The stories that he hears around the fireside are very meager in content. Likewise what he hears while mingling with others anywhere is generally very crude and vulgar. But he likes the story none the less.

The writer found that adult illiterate soldiers listened very eagerly to the reading and rereading of stories which had often delighted his own children when they were three and four years of age. Indeed, the grownup illiterate will revel in such stories as "Jack and the Beanstalk,"